Next Program: Friday next, November 2nd., Adelphi Hall, 7.30 —
Josef von Sternberg’s AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY; Harold Lloyd in PROFESSOR BEWARE

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Films from the mid-20's

"Butterfingers" (Pathé, 1925) Produced by Mack Sennett; directors not stated
With Billy Bevan, Ruth Taylor, Madeleine Hurlock, Vernon Dent, Andy Clyde. Two reels.

An "in-between" Sennett, "Butterfingers" is one of those comedies that isn’t
terribly good in toto, but is made more than worthwhile by some extremely
funny individual gags -- as for example, Billy Bevan’s hiding in the
bathtub. And even when the imagination fails a little, the lively pacing
and the energetic performances keep the film nicely on the move.

"Hoboken to Hollywood" (Pathé, 1926) Produced by Mack Sennett; directed by
Del Lord; with Billy Bevan, Vernon Dent, Lenore Summers, Thelma Hill. 1 1/2 reels.

An old favorite that we repeat every five years or so, "Hoboken to
Hollywood" is a delightful collection of fast-paced and often outrageously
violent sight-gags, with that cherubic little sadist Billy Bevan on top
form, and Vernon Dent suffering pain, indignity, humiliation and sheer
terror as only he can.

"No Father to Guide Him" (Pathé, 1925) Produced by Hal Roach; directed by
Leo McCarey; with Charley Chase, Katherine Grant, Josephine
Crowell, Mickey Bennett, Leo Willis, Duke Kahanamoku, George

With encouraging frequency, these top-notch Charley Chase two-reelers from
R each keep turning up.... "Bad Boy" a few months ago, and "Innocent
Husbands" sitting on the shelf waiting an airing in November. Thanks to
Chase’s refreshing personality, even his routine comedies had a delightful
zip to them, but it seems that he maintained a remarkably high standard,
and that his really good ones didn’t just come along now and then, but formed
a substantial percentage of his large output. "No Father to Guide Him",
like "Bad Boy" and "Mighty Like a Moose", is as strong on story as it is on
individual gags, and gives Charlie an ideal chance to indulge in his
favorite forte -- the gag of embarrassment -- when he is trapped in the ocean
minus his bathing suit. This whole sequence is beautifully played and
developed, full of surprises, and long enough so that one can also enjoy
the pleasing shots of a Santa Monica Beach that has changed remarkably little
through the years. Watch for Fay Wray in a minor role as the attendant at a
bath house.

- Intermission -

"THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER" (Charles R. Rogers-PDC, 1926) Produced and directed by
Renald Hoffman; assistant producer, Glenn Helt; scenario
by L. Richard Schayer & James J. Tyrnan, from an idea by
Dorothy Farnum; edited by Leonard Wheeler; photographed
by Ray June; titles by Russell Birdwell; 8 reels.

With Charles Lammett Mack, Marguerite de la Motte, Henry E. Walthall,
Claire McDowell, Ethel Wales, George Cooper, Willis Marks, Syd Crossley,
Jess Devon, Dick Curtis
One of the many imitations of "The Big Parade" that flooded the market in 1925-27, "The Unknown Soldier" is frankly corn, hokum and formula stuff, and like many independents of the period, it shows its limitations primarily in its scripting. But for an independent film that was probably shot in ten days, it doesn't cheat its audience. It delivers what was expected of it, and probably a little more. The players are all known, and while they're either on the way up or the way down, they're good players. The sets, some constructed, some borrowed from other lots, are solid and substantial, the war scenes excitingly done even if they do smack of the studio and the special effects men, and the production values enhanced by shrewd interpolations of stock newspaper scenes and clips from other pictures -- including some intriguing shots of a zeppelin raid. Photographically (Ray June) it is nicely done, with some excellent closeups, and a minimum of long static takes. And if the editing seems a trifle erratic -- the frequent use of cutaways and intercuts produces a staccato effect at times -- it may be partially because of the somewhat battered condition of the 35mm print from which this dupe was made. (Essentially complete, it seems a bit ragged at reel ends and there is a lot of dirt, plus jump-outs and mis-splices which could have been remedied by overhauling the 35 print before the dupe was made).

However, criticizing this kind of production when it turns out as well as this is rather unfair. As those of you who have been attending our Sunday morning shows know only too well, there is nothing quite as bad, or as cheap, as a really low-grade silent quickie. "The Unknown Soldier" has the courage of its convictions, and the determination to be a good solid single-bill attraction -- a determination substantiated by its 8-reel running time. And, a few slow moments in the first half excepted, it pulls it all off rather well. Director Renald Hoffman was no Vidor, and doubtless knew it. He got into the business making slides and later titles; he had been a producer-director for only a couple of years when he made this film, yet he knows how to keep it on the move, how to use his players to their maximum advantage, and how to change pace effectively and dramatically -- as with that telling little scene where the soldier is killed, unknown to his comrades, in the middle of a card game. Hoffman never graduated from independent films of this type, but he always maintained a certain level of stylish competence which covered up trite material. Incidentally, the very Griffithian-titles are the work of Russell Birdwell, who later parlayed his gift of gab into a highly successful public relations agency, and even directed a film or two himself.

"The Unknown Soldier" is particularly well served by its leading players. Charles Emmett Mack, here midway between his Griffith and his Warner Brothers periods, is rather pleasing as the hero; Henry B. Walithall's gentle face and beautiful eyes work wonders for his rather limited dramatic scenes, and Marguerite de la Motte, much more a participant in the action than she was usually called upon to be, is often extremely moving. The plot itself, with echoes of "The Big Parade" and "Way Down East", and suggestions of "Wings" and "Seventh Heaven", telegraphs most of its punches, but manages to rise above being mere soap opera most of the time. The basic story-line is really no more contrived or unlikely than that of "7th Heaven", and with more subtlety and skill in writing and direction, this might have been far more than a programmer. However, dramatic license or no, it's hard to excuse one classic geographic clanger. Arlington Cemetery is of course, immediately over the Potomac from Washington; yet the script somehow contrives to have the Unknown Soldier's ceremonial funeral go from Washington to Arlington and "en route" pass through the little town of Homewood!